

“SHINING FACE” AS HIDDEN AND REVEALED CHRISTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. The “shining face” theology as luminous metamorphosis of a visionary has experienced three great challenges: the anthropomorphic controversy, iconoclastic debate and the hesychast dispute. This study attempts to make a mystagogical connection between those three theological developments which are standing all together in God’s holy fire with the ‘unveiled face’. I have imposed myself a line of research into the contemplative spirituality field, which in fact represents a hermeneutical trajectory: Glory in the NT (hidden-revealed or being-energies) – Glory in the NT (theosis as Christification) – pre-nicene Christology (*eikonic* and apophatic Light / glory) – Desert Fathers (“shining face” christology) – Efreem the Syrian (clothing metaphore) – Dionysius the Areopagite (veils of theurgic rays and Christ’s Presence as immanent transcendence or as tension between transcendent hiddenness and revelation) – Palamas hesychasm (christology of the uncreated light). I am the first who calls the light from the “Shining Faces” of the Desert Fathers as an uncreated light and a discovery of a Hidden pre-Nicene (apophatic) Christology. I have to emphasize that because these two aspects of my ‘disclosure’ (meaning ‘uncreated’¹ light and ‘hidden christology’ of the Desert Fathers) were inspired to me by the readings in the field of palamite theology which consider that this light of the

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¹ No one has so far called the shining light on the faces of the desert fathers to be uncreated (this being, actually, a palamite hesychast concept appeared and used only in the fourteenth century) and also bodily experienced since this earthly life (the second emphasis into the hesychastic theology). See in this regard my studies: N. Tănase, “‘The Shining Face’ and the revealing Paradox - Man is theopathic. The light of the Face of Christ, despite its uncreated and incomprehensible nature, is perceptible by human senses (purity-illumination-vision or κάθαρσις-φωτισμός-θέωσις),” *Studii Teologice* 3 (2015); N. Tănase, “The Aesthetics of Asceticism. ‘The feeling’ (*aisthesis*) of the Apophatic as Irradiance of the Inner Presence of Christ (Prolegomena for a Dialogue between Ascetic and Phenomenology),” *Mitropolia Olteniei* 5-8 (2016): 149-163; N. Tănase, “Shining Light shedding from earthen vessels - Christology of the Desert Fathers. Christ’s ascetic interiorization, somatic experience and outward luminosity,” in *23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies*. Belgrade 2016 (*forthcoming volume*); N. Tănase, “Aesthetics of Apophaticism. The Christophany as the enipostatic Light of Godhead shining of the face of the ascetic,” *Studii teologice* 2 (2015); N. Tănase, “Body (*epsoma*) and Glory / Light (*peooy*). Apa Aphou and the Hesychastic-Eucharistic turn of the Anthropomorphite controversy,” in *Dumnezeu - izvorul înțelepciunii: Teologie și educație ascetică la Sfinții Părinți*, ed. Daniel Lemeni (Astra Museum, Sibiu: 2016).

ascet's glowing face to be an uncreated light experienced by the body (*aesthetically*), an inner presence of Christ who identifies himself with His light (*apophatic*), He Himself being the deifying light as uncreated divine gift. All studies in the Late Antiquity ignore this visionary experience, reducing it to the level of a simple metaphor of light (completing the ascetic quest for "real self"), a metaphor in which the saint's life is hagiographically (*mystifying!*) described. A second reason for this 'blindness' was a restraint coming from the Evagrian theology that draws attention to the danger of seeking visionary experiences, because in that light there is the risk of an illusory or deceitful demonic appearance. Another reason represents the fact that the hesychast controversy and the theology of the uncreated light as divine energy of the Saint Gregory Palamas' theology (which in Western media has long been discredited as heretical) have played a negative role in accepting the nature of uncreated light into the "shining face" Christology of the Desert Fathers.

Keywords: *Shining face*, Desert Fathers, Gregory Palamas, iconoclasm, apophaticism, hesychasm, divine light, deification, theology of the icon.

Introduction: God's shining face – Christ will radiate within us like to the Desert Fathers: Pambo, Sisoe, Silvanus

Firstly, this study is about the Desert Fathers' contemplative experience of *an outward luminosity, a physical radiance*, similar to that of the Athonite hesychasts of the 14th century in late Byzantium. So, there is a convergence of desert wisdom with the Palamite hesychast theology. On these *unveiled shining faces, the divine energy of the 'Christ the Image and Glory of God'* is being revealed. *Christ will radiate within us like to the desert Fathers: Pambo, Sisoe, Silvanus.* Christology of the Desert Fathers overlaps with pre-Nicene Christology. In anthropological terms of the theosis, man is *the mirror of divine glory* (δόξα). So, just as the *light of the transfiguration the light-bearing robe* of the unfallen Adam has an equally theological importance for *theosis*. Deification at the Desert Fathers acquires a specific anthropological content as Christification, that finds its fulfillment in a *face-to-face encounter* who, is both a theological theme and a spiritual teaching, both the goal of the divine economy and the process by which the economy is worked out in the believer. For Palamas, deification is, also, a supernatural gift that transforms both mind and body, making divinity visible (Triad 3.1. 33). Likeness also means a radiation of the presence of God within man, a „reciprocal interiority“. In the saints this communion is expressed in the way God's glory is reflected in their faces, in anticipation of the age to come. Therefore, this study is about the Desert Fathers' contemplative experience of *an outward luminosity, a physical radiance*, similar to that of the hesychasts

Athonite of the 14th century in late Byzantium. So, there is a convergence of desert wisdom with the Palamite hesychast theology, because this putting on of the *clothing of holiness* of the Desert Fathers is another component of the Glory likeness, is the visible glory of Transfiguration. On these *unveiled shining faces*², the divine energy of 'Christ the Image and Glory of God' is being revealed. This is the Christology of the Desert Fathers.

Secondly, speaking about the hesychast method of prayer and transformation of the body, *Gregory Palamas* also uses this Pauline theology of 2 Corinthians in *Triad* 1.2.2: „Paul says: ‘God, who has ordered light to shine from darkness, has made His light to shine in our hearts, in order that we may be enlightened by the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6); but he adds, ‘We carry this treasure in earthen vessels’ (2 Cor. 4:7). So we carry the Father’s light in the face (*prosōpon*) of Jesus Christ in earthen vessels, that is, in our bodies, in order to know the glory of the Holy Spirit.” We could grasp the convergence between the desert ascetic spirituality and the hesychast spirituality in the work of Gregory Palamas. For him, Moses the lawgiver, Stephen the protomartyr, and Arsenius the desert ascetic are examples from the Bible and the Fathers are men who were visibly transformed by divine light (*Triad* 2.3.9). God transcends the senses yet the knowledge of God is experiential. The monks know this. They see the hypostatic light spiritually – in reality, not in a symbolic fashion. During the hesychast controversy, St Gregory Palamas defends the reality of the encounter with God of those monks who reported seeing a vision of light at the culmination of intense period of prayer.

² In Ps 67:1–2, 80:3, and 80:7 *God’s shining face*² or *presence* (פנים) *procures salvation* (ישועה). David D. Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel. Divine presence and God’s people in the First Gospel* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996); Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God* (Orleans: Paraclete Press, 2009); Christopher Barina Kaiser, *Seeing the Lord’s Glory. Kyriocentric Visions and the Dilemma of Early Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014); N.T. Wright, “Reflected Glory: 2 Corinthians 3:18” in *Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Carey C. Newman, *Paul’s Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); David A. Renwick, *Paul, the Temple, and the Presence of God* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel: The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); Ben C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Linda L. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory. Paul’s Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3.1–18* (New York: T&T Clark 1991); Paul B. Duff, *Moses in Corinth: the apologetic context of 2 Corinthians 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); M. David Litwa, “2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for Theosis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation (JTI)* 2 (2008); Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Philippe Paul-Luc Viguier, *A Biblical Theology of the Glory of God* (Sun Valley, California: Lexham Press, 2012); Meredith G. Kline, *Glory in our Midst. A Biblical-Theological Reading of Zechariah’s Night Visions* (Eugen, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001).

For the light is nothing less than the *uncreated radiance of God – a divine energy accesible to the senses*. This manifestation of Christ is *not something external to ourselves. It is only by having Christ radiant within us that we can enter into the truth which even in the Gospels is veiled from ordinary eyes*. Abba Pambo, Sisoës, Silvanus, St Seraphim of Sarov, were men whose radiance was the product of inward openness. *Transfiguration* becomes an interior experience to St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) and Archimandrite Sophrony (1896-1991).

Thirdly, in this study we will try to present the iconographic tradition as a form of visual theology, though it is difficult to conceptualize what it used to be like in the immediate presence of God. The Transfiguration is one of the keys that can unlock the mystery of our eschatological fate, glorified body and the participation in the energies of God. All the ascetics who had the experience of the uncreated light or were transfigured themselves describe it in very similar way and connect it with the Transfiguration of Christ. It is only in later hesychasm that we are assured theologically that these experiences were in the body. Within this context, liturgical art and aesthetics differ from secular aesthetics, as being beyond the five senses and beyond the art itself. The Fathers, from Origen to John of Damascus, refer to Christ as the visible image and consubstantial icon of the Father. Icons were something more than vessels of the grace of God and suggest the real presence of the *grace* of the depicted person. The Transfiguration enjoyed a renewed interest in fourteenth-century theology, and, at the same time, a mysterious complex, mandorla, made its appearance, the so-called “hesychastic” mandorla (first it appears in the churches of Mistras and in manuscripts of the ex-emperor and hesychastic monk, John Cantacuzenos). Therefore, in our study we analyze how the icon of the Transfiguration encapsulates the ascetic ascent to deification.

1. Image of Light - “If you will, you can become all flame” (Joseph of Panephysis). The Luminous Metamorphosis of a Visionary

What Plotinos is trying to put across in his treatise is that: “*No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty*”.³ Archimandrite Patapios says that this insight can profitably

³ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, New York: Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation) 69-70: “Οὐ γὰρ ἂν πώποτε εἶδεν ὀφθαλμὸς ἥλιον ἡλιοειδὴς μὴ γεγεννημένος, οὐδὲ τὸ καλὸν ἂν ἴδοι ψυχὴ μὴ καλὴ γενομένη. Γενέσθω δὲ πρῶτον θεοειδὴς πᾶς καὶ καλὸς πᾶς, εἰ μέλλει θεάσασθαι θεὸν τε καὶ καλόν” (I.6.9.30-34).

be applied to the sacred art of iconography because, for Plotinos, "*light is the incorporeal energeia of the luminous body*" (Plotinus, 1:241).⁴ But, how does all this relate to Byzantine iconography? Gary Gurtler after he provides an excellent summary of Plotinos' ideas in Ennead V.8.4-6, he sees a similar suppression of spatial and temporal dimensions in Byzantine art, in which "*Bodies are shown elongated and thus spiritualized. The heads of the saints are slightly enlarged to convey the purity and insight of their minds.*"⁵ The aim of this art is to effect a transformation of the viewer's own interior character. According to D. N. Koutras, Plotinos uses the image of light to describe the relation between the source of light (ἰδέα) and the lighted body (εἰκών).⁶ Thus, the work of art, as an eikon depending on form approaches it more or less, according to its capacity of receiving the light of form.

Ps.-Dionysios view of the univers as a structure essentially infused by the divine light reflects also a metaphysics of the light, whilst Jesus is the deifying light and hierarchies communicate light and love, and "*this light, which proceeds from and returns to its source, the Father, is none other than Jesus*".⁷ Jesus appears to Paul as a blinding light from heaven, "his pseudonymous identity" in Acts 9, 3 and 22, 6: "suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) a light from heaven flashed about [Paul]".⁸

Image of light is a strong metaphor for Godhead. The increased interest in the divine light that took place after the tenth century is a semnificant factor for the return of the oval mandorla with rays, which expresses better the contemplative ascent toward deification and divine light. The desert asetics, also, based

⁴ Archimandrite Patapios, "Images of the Invisible Beauty: Plotinian Aesthetics and Byzantine Iconography," in *The Sculptor and His Stone Selected Readings on Hellenistic and Christian Learning and Thought in the Early Greek Fathers*, ed. Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock, 2016), 119-130.

⁵ Gary M. Gurtler, "Plotinus and Byzantine Aesthetics," *The Modern Schoolman* 66 (1988-1989): 275-284, here 281.

⁶ D. N. Koutras, "The Essence of the Work of Art according to Plotinus" *Diotima* 14 (1988): 147-153, here 149.

⁷ Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite "No Longer I"* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 94. Dionysian Christology can be read as a response to Paul's rhetorical question from 2 Cor 6:14: "What fellowship is there between light and darkness?" (Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, 97).

⁸ Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity*, 95-96. Several passages from Paul's letters support Dionysius' understanding of Jesus as light: 2 Cor 4:6 ("For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"); Eph 5:8 ("For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light"); Col 1:12 ("the Father has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light").

their knowledge of divine light upon experience, not theory.⁹ The luminous metamorphosis of a visionary becomes possible as the consequence of the beatific vision of the glorious 'form' of the Deity. "*Similarly, as many lamps are lighted from the one, same fire, so also it is necessary that the bodies of the saints, which are members of Christ, become the same as Christ himself is* (Ps.-Macarius 15, 38)."¹⁰ In the Macarian homilies Moses' shining countenance and the luminosity of Adam's prelapsarian *tselem* serve as metaphors for major paradigms of the transformational vision. In the Macarian writings, one can also encounter a third paradigm of luminous transformation which is radically different from the previous two traditions. "*In a peculiar Macarian understanding of Christ's transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, the duality of inner and outer in visio Dei is attempted through in a new metaphor of the transformational vision – Christ's 'Body of Light'*".¹¹ Therefore, into the Macarian theology the *Kabod* internalization become possible only as a consequence of the event of Christ's transfiguration. 'Brightening Face' Christology of the Desert Fathers is an ascetic interiorization of Christ, together with a somatic experience and outward luminosity.

For Saint Gregory Palamas this hypostatic light, seen spiritually by the saints, is known by them by experience to exist/through experience of existing, as they tell us, and to exist not symbolically only, as do manifestations produced by fortuitous events; but it is an immaterial and divine illumination, an invisibly grace seen and ignorantly known. What it is, they do not pretend to know. But, this light is not the essence of God, for that is inaccessible and incommunicable. At

⁹ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Alphabetical Collection*, Translated, with a foreword by Benedicta Ward, SLG, Preface by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, Cistercian Publications 59 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: The Institute of Cistercian Studies, Western Michigan University, 1975), 101: "*His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him: If you will, you can become all flame*" (Joseph of Panephris 7); "*his face shone like the sun... Once more his countenance suddenly became like the sun*" (Sisoës 14, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 215); "*coming out of the church with a shining face and white body*" (Paul the Simple 1, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 206); "*God glorified him so that one could not gaze steadfastly at him because of the glory of his countenance*" (Pambo 1, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 196); "*They said of Abba Pambo that he was like Moses, who received the image of the glory of Adam when his face shone. His face shone like lightening and he was like a king sitting on his throne*" (Pambo 12, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 197); "*The Fathers used to say that someone met Abba Silvanus one day and saw his face and body shining like an angel and he fell with his face to the ground. He said that others also had obtained this grace*" (Sivanus 12, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 224); "*A brother came to the cell of Abba Arsenius at Scetis. Waiting outside the door he saw the old man entirely like a flame*" (Arsenius, 27 (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 13).

¹⁰ Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and The Great Letter*, Translated, Edited and with an Introduction by George A. Maloney, S.J., Preface by Kallistos Ware (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), 88.

¹¹ Andrei Orlov, Alexander Golitzin, "Many Lamps are Lightened from the One: Paradigms of the Transformational Vision in Macarian Homilies," *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001): 281-298, here 295.

other times, "*it transforms the body, and communicates its own splendour to it when, miraculously, the light which deifies the body becomes accessible to the bodily eyes. (7) Thus indeed did the great Arsenius appear when engaged in hesychastic combat; similarly Stephen, whilst being stoned, (9) and Moses, when he descended from the mountain. Sometimes the light 'speaks' clearly, as it were with ineffable words, to him who contemplates it. Such was the case with Paul*" (Tr. II. iii. 8-9).¹² Moses the lawgiver, Stephen the protomartyr, and Arsenius the desert ascetic are examples from the Bible and the Fathers of men who were visibly transformed by divine light (Tr. 2. 3. 9). God transcends the senses yet the knowledge of God is experiential. The monks know this. They spiritually see the hypostatic light – in reality, not in a symbolic manner. The divine light is 'the pledge of the future promise, the grace of adoption, the deifying gift of the Spirit' (Tr. 3. 1. 6). To access the divine corporeality of light, veiled by Christ's visible body, Christians need to be initiated. Thus, Jesus unveils his Divine and Glorious Form on the Mount of Transfiguration.¹³

2. Likeness, Corporality and Immateriality (*asomata graphē*)

The first fundamental criterion of iconoclast theology and christology is the distance they place between icon and person, secondly their refusal to accept any kind of hypostatic pictorial representation, and thirdly their final inability to reconcile "pictorial representation" (*eikonizesthai*) with "hypostatisation" or real existence (*hyphestanai*).¹⁴

As Henry Maguire has argued, the iconoclast debate and the victory of the iconodules resulted in a new definition of the role and function of icons: "*As a result of the debate over images, there was less ambiguity after iconoclasm concerning their status. Christian icons were seen as intermediaries between the*

¹² Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, Edited with an Introduction by John Meyendorff Translation by Nicholas Gendle, Preface by Jaroslav Pelikan (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983, here in after: Tr.), 57.

¹³ John McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition*, SBEC 9 (Lewiston/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 155-157.

¹⁴ Ambrosios Giakalis, *Images of the Divine. The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council*, revised edition, with a Foreword by Henry Chadwick (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 99. The body of Christ and bodies of the saints are described by the iconoclasts as 'not present' (*me paronta*). Giakalis mentions also the problem of the iconoclastic understanding of the Eucharist as an icon of Christ. He quotes B.N. Giannopoulos who argues that for the iconoclasts the bread of the Eucharist is not the body of Christ, nor an icon or type of Christ himself because the divine nature and hypostasis are undepictable. Another scholar who cites is S. Gero, who, on the other hand, asserts the consubstantiality of the divine Eucharist and the flesh of Christ. See, S. Gero, "The Eucharistic Doctrine of the Byzantine Iconoclasts," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 68 (1975): 4-22, here 9.

suppliant and the invisible power rather than as powers in themselves. In theory, it was no longer possible for icons of the saints to have the ability to act on their own; icons could only facilitate access to the prototypes in the hope of their intercession with the supreme Judge."¹⁵ It was made clear that veneration was due to icons because of their representations, not because of their inherent supranatural powers. According to Brown, the iconoclastic controversy was instead essentially a dilemma over the position of the holy in the Byzantine world.¹⁶ The need to define and to name that differentiates post-iconoclastic Byzantine portraiture from earlier practice appears in every medium and type of object. The post-iconoclastic concept of the functioning of images had important consequences for the design and presentation of the portraits of the saints.¹⁷ The importance of intercession in the functioning of icons is emphasized in many post-iconoclastic saints' Lives.¹⁸ From the time of the early desert fathers, monks had been compared to the bodiless angels, the *asomata*.¹⁹

After the complete victory over the paganism, there was not much need for philosophical or secular wisdom, contemplation and prayer are replacing the intellectual interest. Iconoclasm changed the situation, because, to be defenders of icons, the monks had to turn to philosophy and the study of the Fathers and to construct intellectual arguments to refute the accusation of the iconoclasts. Therefore, education and study found a new place and purpose within monastic activities. The relationship between painting and eloquence had been a familiar theme of ancient rhetoric that the fourth-century Fathers of the Greek Church applied to Christian contexts. Byzantine authors made numerous references to the connections between

¹⁵ Henry Maguire, *The Icons of their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 138.

¹⁶ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1989), 103-152.

¹⁷ Warren T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 103-132.

¹⁸ Liz James, "'Seeing's believing, but feeling's the truth': Touch and the Meaning of Byzantine Art," in *Images of the Byzantine World. Visions, Messages and Meanings. Studies Presented to Leslie Brubaker*, ed. Angeliki Lymberopoulou (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 1-14.

¹⁹ H. Maguire, *The Icons of their Bodies*, 67. See, also: E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 81-150; E. Kitzinger, *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); H. Maguire, "Disembodiment and Corporality in Byzantine Images of the Saints," in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. B. Cassidy (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 75-83; A. Cameron, "The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation," in *The Church and the Arts*, ed. D. Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1-42; L. Brubaker, "Byzantine Art in the Ninth Century: Theory, Practice, and Culture," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 13 (1989): 23-93; "Perception and Conception: Art, Theory and Culture in Ninth-century Byzantium," *Word and Image* 5 (1989): 19-32; G. Dagron, "Holy Images and Likeness," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 23-33.

verbal eloquence and the visual arts.²⁰ Thus the relationship between art and eloquence became an important concept in the arsenal of the defenders of images during the iconoclastic controversy. *"The usefulness of art as a means of instruction was only one of the arguments in favor of Christian images that John of Damascus derived from the relationship between writing and painting. He also exploited the multiple meanings in the term eikōn, which, like the English word 'image', could mean both a concrete representation, as in a painting, and a conceptual representation, such as might be created in writing".*²¹

3. "Prosopological" reading of the Transfiguration and the ascetic tradition of ascent

What seems to escape the attention of the iconoclasts entirely is the experience of the prophets, apostles and saints of the Old and New Testaments, which constitutes the vision of the person of the Logos in his uncreated glory. This vision, both before and after the Incarnation, has always been the quintessence of the Orthodox tradition, the end and supreme goal of both Testaments. For this reason, says Giakalis, *"the vision of the icons, and especially of the icon of Christ, becomes indispensable"*.²² The icon as a "door" and as a "self-manifested vision" proved to be a real bridge connecting the worshipper with the uncreated energies of Christ and of his saints. The question therefore arises: What is the relationship between this "visible" character and the divine, uncreated hypostasis of God the

²⁰ John Monfasani, *George of Trebizond; A Biography and a Study of His Rhetoric and Logic* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 248-255. The Greek language itself encouraged the Byzantines to think in these terms. The word *graphē*, for example, was used for both writing and painting, *historia* could mean either a written history or a picture, whereas *schēma* was both a figure of rhetoric and a pose in painting. Leslie Brubaker, "Image, meta-text and text in Byzantium" in *Herméneutique du text d'histoire: orientation, interprétation et questions nouvelles*, ed. S. Sato (Tokyo: Nagoya University, 2009), 93-100.

²¹ Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10. He also points out the antithesis in Byzantine art and literature (e.g., juxtaposition of the Virgin and Child with the Dormition): *"In the Byzantine church, antithesis was more than a figure of speech; it was a habit of thought. This stylistic device, common both to antique rhetoric and to the literature of the Bible, provided Christian writers with a ready-made mould in which to cast the paradoxes of their faith. The Fathers of the Greek church made liberal use of antithesis in order to express the paradoxical nature of Christ's incarnation, for it enabled them to clothe unfamiliar mysteries in a linguistic convention that pagan education had made familiar to their audiences"* (Maguire, *Art and Eloquence*, p. 53). He has moved the study of Byzantine art in new directions, revealing a vista of complexity and variation. See, also, H. Maguire, *Nectar and Illusion: Nature in Byzantine Art and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48-77.

²² Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 103-104.

Logos? The answer came from St Theodore who does not identify the visible character with the uncreated hypostasis of Christ, but with a property of this hypostasis which because of the Incarnation is present also in the icon and permits a unity between archetype and icon, avoiding any possibility of division.²³ But, according to Giakalis, “*it must be admitted that it is difficult for one to appreciate with the same realism as the iconophiles the immanence of the ‘incommunicable’ hypostasis of the prototype in the imitative icon. It is an immanence which is not proved in any way, yet it does confirm the ‘ineffability’ of the person*”.²⁴

The oval mandorla is, strictly speaking, an illumination around the body of Christ that emanates, presumably, directly from it. The oval mandorla is “*more christological than trinitarian; it refers to the nature of Christ more than to the glory of God*”. According to Andreas Andreopoulos, the oval mandorla “*refers to the luminous as opposed to the spatial understanding of the glory of God*”.²⁵ An indirect implication of this was that Christ could be depicted in His divinity. St. Gregory Palamas, as well as St. Symeon the New Theologian²⁶, indentifies the light of the mystical experience with the light of Christ. The experience of the light shows that Christ shines His light and dwells within the mystic.

In hesychastic theology the ascent is associated with the struggle for deification. There is an iconografic change in which Tabor had absorbed the mystical tradition formerly associated with Sinai (darknes of Sinai was influential in the development of apophatic theology). The visual connection presents a hierarchy of theophanies, with the Transfiguration on Tabor as the culmination of the previous theophanies on Sinai. The typological primise of Sinai was fulfilled on Tabor, but the hidden God remains undisclosed even with the Incarnation of Christ. Also, on the Tabor the radiant, glorified face of Christ was revealed to the apostle. The face of the Word that shone like the sun is the characteristic hiddenness of

²³ Strangely, says Giakalis, some contemporary Orthodox scholars maintain that the presence of a mandorla around the person of Christ in his icons expresses the identity of his uncreated hypostasis with the “visible character” of his human nature. See, J. Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood NY: SVS Press, 1975), 188; apud, Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 111.

²⁴ Giakalis, *Images of the Divine*, 113.

²⁵ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis. The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 188. Andreopoulos mainly refers to the Sinai mosaic (image of Christ clothed in light), which also employs this oval mandorla and was made at a time and a place when Christology was being defined (relationship between the two natures of Christ).

²⁶ Hilarion Alfeyev, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), 226, n. 94. He says that the term φῶς (*light*) appears in 54 of the 58 ‘Hymns’ by Symeon, in 2 of the 3 *Theol.*, in the majority of *Eth.* and *Cat.* The verb ὁράω (‘to see’) is used in Symeon’s *Theol.* and *Eth.* even more frequently than the term ‘light’. Other terms connected with the vision of light (φωτίζω, φωτισμός, ἐλλάμπω, ἐλλαμψις, θέα, θεάομαι, ὅραις, etc.) are also widely employed.

his being. The face of Christ issued radiance and revealed God and the apostles realized that God is a *person* (*prosopon* – which means both “face” and “person”). In contrast to “name” Christology, “wisdom” Christology, and “glory” Christology, Bogdan G. Bucur notes that “face” Christology, one of the early building blocks for emerging Christian doctrine, never became a major player, but was replaced by more precise vocabulary shaped by the Christological controversies of the third and fourth centuries.²⁷ But besides this who can make an imitation of the invisible, incorporeal, uncircumscribed, formless God? A certain tale, too, is told, when Augarus was king over the city of the Edessenes, he sent a portrait painter to paint a likeness of the Lord, and when the painter could not paint because of the brightness that shone from His countenance, the Lord Himself put a garment over His own divine and life-giving face and impressed on it an image of Himself and sent this to Augarus, to satisfy thus his desire.²⁸ The “face” Christology became a Christological controversy during the Byzantine debate over religious imagery (icons), ‘iconomachy’ in the 8th and 9th centuries. So, this “face” Christology is embodied in the theology of the Icon.

This “prosopological”²⁹ reading of the Transfiguration stands firmly within the ascetic tradition of ascent. John of Damascus describes the ascent of the Mount Thabor: “*hesychia is the mother of prayer and prayer is the revelation of the divine glory*”.³⁰ Andreopoulos highlights the relationship between Incarnation in the Western Church (the historical descent of Christ) and theology of deification in the Eastern Church (the experiential ascent of asceticism): “*The prominence of Thabor and the upward movement it represents in later Byzantine iconography, along with its symbolism of ascetic ascent, expressed the Eastern view of synergy (a combination of the upward and the downward movement that some of the later mandorla expressed magnificently) as opposed to ‘grace alone’*”.³¹

²⁷ Bogdan G. Bucur, “The Divine Face and the Angels of the face: Jewish Apocalyptic Themes in Early Christology and Pneumatology,” in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology: Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2009), 143-153. Bucur outlines the occurrence of “face” Christology in Clement of Alexandria, Aphrahat the Persian sage, and in the seven spirits of the book of revelation.

²⁸ St John Damascene, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, IV, 16: “Concerning Images”, editor Paul A. Böer Sr., (Veritatis Splendor, Publications CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 272-273.

²⁹ Andreopoulos *Metamorphosis*, 200. See, John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).

³⁰ John of Damascus, *Homily for the Feast of the Transfiguration* 10, in *Light on the Mountain. Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, translated by Brian E. Daley, S.J. (Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013), 218.

³¹ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 208.

4. The Face of Christ in a Sixth-Century Icon from Sinai. The Aesthetics of Christ's Known in Two Natures

The Palaiologan hesychasme employs a 'binary formula' closely associated with cognate patterns (visible-invisible) of Christology (two natures: divine-human), anthropology (body-soul) Triadology (essence-activities, manifestations) and Holy Sacraments (in a twofold form: visible and material – intelligible and mystical). Maximos Constas says that: *"Once again, the principle of physical and metaphysical union is a direct corollary of the Incarnation, an event in which the invisible God has visibly 'appeared among us', traversing and thereby abolishing the opposition of 'above' and 'below'. In the dual-natured person of the God-man, both the (created, visible) image and its (uncreated, invisible) archetype are woven together in a uniform coincidence of opposites rendered present in the sacramental mystery of the liturgy"*.³²

Christ is the "Icon of the Invisible God" (Col. 1, 15), but in the same time he is the bruised, defenseless man who "had no beauty" (Is. 53, 2). The Transfiguration reveals in the person of Jesus Christ, the dwelling of the light in the mirror of the flesh. The Face of Christ in the uncreated light is an icon, a theophany, a glorious manifestation of God. The pre-Iconoclasm sixth-century icon of Christ from Sinai was a powerful symbol of Justinian's empire. In this icon, which was produced in Constantinople, Christ's face is luminous, creating the impression of a single light source. Within the face the two large eyes differ in terms of shape, size and activity (one in the light and the other in relative darkness). Here, says Constas, *"we are presented with a timid, slightly sad-looking young man, who hesitantly turns to us in a gesture of prayer or petition. He seems poised to bless and perhaps even to touch us. With his hands gently raised before his heart, he appears poignantly, almost pathetically, human in his unspoken yearning for contact and love. And yet, absorbed in his prayer, his eyes are turned inward, so that he looks, not at us, but at God. His dark counterpart, on the other hand, is a ponderous Titan, aloof to all relation. Solemn and impassive, he is self-contained in the closed circle formed by the armor of his authoritative volumes, themselves suggestive of ominous secrets and threatening revelations."*³³

The use of contrasting models also occurs in the apse mosaic of Transfiguration from Sinai. The examples of this technique are the different degrees of corporality in the figure of Moses and Christ. Moses' feet are planted firmly on the ground, and his body, which is slightly turned, stands in classical *contrapposto*, giving it a high degree of physical reality. Also, his loose leg creates an effect of motion in space. In conclusion, says Constas *"These marks*

³² Maximos Constas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2014), 210.

³³ Constas, *The Art of Seeing*, 51.

of corporeality are effectively contrasted with the relative immateriality of the body of Christ, achieved through strict frontality and the suspension of the figure in space independently of any ground line."³⁴ Here the impassive face of Christ contrasts with the expressive face of Elijah. So, classical corporeality and Christian abstractionism are used to distinguish between the human and divine. The Face of Christ is devoid of emotion, a quality of the dematerialization of the body (absence of shading). This, believe Conostas, "*the artist of the Sinai icon employed two different styles in order to express two contrasting qualities within the one person of Christ*".³⁵

Looking at the icon from Sinai, we are face to face with Christ, concealed within a realm beyond perception, a visual expression of Christ's two natures: divinity and humanity, expressing in iconic language, the theological context in which it was produced: the duality in Christ (one hypostasis and a double consubstantiality). The union in no way abolished the distinction in the nature, but rather preserved the characteristic property of each. So, the defenders of Chalcedon made use of icons in their debates with the Monophysites. The "two natures" theology supports the "Chalcedonian" interpretation of the Sinai Christ – an ingenious depiction of two contrasting natures united in a single *prosopon*. According to Cyril, the mind cannot "know" the two natures of Christ in separation, but only through the experience of contemplation (*theoria*). The Sinai Christ was an attempt to portray what could not be seen by human sight: "*Theoria was a single act encompassing both hermeneutics and Christology, a movement from the visible to the invisible.*"³⁶ God is at once transcendent and immanent, hidden and revealed, known and unknown and the opposites are not absorbed into unity, but "*the duality that our icon portrays is not that of Christ's two natures, but rather a duality within God himself: the paradoxical co-existence of mercy and judgment*".³⁷ It is sad that for Conostas these two contradictory attributes offer a framework for his interpretation of the Sinai Christ. Even though he says that these divine names and attributes "received consummate expression in the doctrine of the divine

³⁴ Conostas, *The Art of Seeing*, 52.

³⁵ Conostas, *The Art of Seeing*, 54.

³⁶ Conostas, *The Art of Seeing*, 66.

³⁷ Conostas, *The Art of Seeing*, 68. The foundation of the Conostas' concept lay on Philo of Alexandria. Firstly, according to Jewish tradition, mercy and judgement are two ways, or qualities, according to which God is said to deal with the world. In the Old testament, these two ways are associated with two names of God: mercy was identified with the name of *Elohim*, whereas judgment was identified with the name *Jehovah*. Philo believes that the divine attributes are both interior and exterior to God. See, David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature* (Minneapolis, Van Gorcum/Fortress Press, 1993). Conostas don't sees, here, emphasized enough, the being-energy distinction, but he reduces his interpretation to the distinction between two attributes of God.

energies”, his original statement remains “*the movement of our eyes across the face of the icon reproduces the two-fold experiential structure of Philo’s theology*”.³⁸ But, Conostas returns to the latent duality that we saw concentrated in the face of the Sinai Christ, which is manifested in the gestures of Christ’s body (a sign of acceptance of the right hand and a gesture of rejection in Christ’s left hand). Within a mandorla, a symbol of his heavenly glory, His face and body slightly to his right. This is the distinction in which “*the Sinai Christ appears to be turning, so that what was imminent there is here fully realized*”.³⁹

5. The Ascetic Interpretation of the Sixth-Century Mosaic of the Transfiguration in St Catherine Monastery on Sinai

a) “Suddenly” (ἐξαίφνης), a beam of light descends to him (*Vita Antonii* 10)⁴⁰

Golitzin finds in the mid-sixth century, the mosaic of the Transfiguration at Saint Catherine’s, Sinai, the traditional topic associated with the theophanies of the God-man Christ in light. “*Christ is depicted clothed in brilliant white and gold. Rays shoot out from his Person to strike Elijah and Moses at his right and left, together with the stunned disciples at his feet*”.⁴¹ He links Dionysian theology to this interpretation Christ’s mosaic of Sinai. He asserts that the Divine Names for Dionysius are sacramental in their character. They carry the divine presence (divine light), because the *divine names are θεῖα ἀγάλματα*, “divine images” or “icons” of God.⁴² The immateriality of the soul is an image of the incorporeality of

³⁸ Conostas, *The Art of Seeing*, 72.

³⁹ Conostas, *The Art of Seeing*, 79.

⁴⁰ Athanasius Alexandrinus, *Vita Antonii*, PG 26, 837-976, transl. J.H. Newman: St. Athanasius the Great, Life of St. Anthony the Great, <http://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/anthony-life.asp?pg=25> [23. 04. 2017]. “&10. Nor was the Lord then forgetful of Anthony’s wrestling, but was at hand to help him. So looking up he saw the roof as it were opened, and **a ray of light descending to him** [καὶ ἀκτὴν τινα φωτὸς κατερχομένην πρὸς αὐτόν]. **The demons suddenly vanished**, the pain of his body straightway ceased, and the building was again whole. But Anthony feeling the help, and getting his breath again, and being freed from pain, besought **the vision which had appeared to him, saying**, ‘Where wert thou? Why didst thou not appear at the beginning to make my pains to cease?’ And a voice came to him, ‘Anthony, I was here, but I waited to see thy fight; wherefore since thou hast endured, and hast not been worsted, I will ever be a succour to thee, and will make thy name known everywhere.’ Having heard this, Anthony arose and prayed, and received such strength that he perceived that **he had more power in his body than formerly**. And he was then about thirty-five years old”.

⁴¹ Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita: 1 Cor 3:16, John 14:21-23* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 57.

⁴² Alexander Golitzin, *Et introibo ad altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita* (Thessaloniki: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikōn, 1994), 70-74.

God, Holy Scripture, too, is full of symbols. Thus, God can only be known in the experience of His presence, His light. Also, the patristic meaning for "mystical" is hidden. God is hidden by the light (*Ep. I*) and His divine darkness (γνόφος) is the unapproachable light, his dwelling place (*Ep. V*).⁴³ Therefore, light is both the Presence (*shekinach*) as immanent transcendence or as tension between transcendent hiddenness and revelation.

Therefore, for Golitzin we have here a hidden Christology within the Paul-Anthony-Evagrius-Dionisius light experience. Within the face shining with the rays we might also recall the μεσημβρία ('midday') in the Christophany of Saint Paul described by the 'ray' imagery around the Person of Christ. For him *"the blue denotes the color of the firmament beneath God's feet in Exodus 24:10, a text which Evagrius takes up in his portrayal of the azure light of the intellect awaiting the descent of the uncreated light of the Trinity"*.⁴⁴ Also, in the epistles there is a certain alternation, especially in *Ep. I* and *V*, between darkness and light. So, says Golitzin *"in Ep. III we met the paradox of Christ's sudden manifestation: light, overpowering, coming forth from the depths of silent divinity and, still, hidden even in the manifestation. The Sinai mosaic strikes me, in short, as a portrayal of the ἐξαίφνης"*⁴⁵ ('suddenly')".⁴⁶ We receive the "deifying gift" mentioned in Dionisius' *Ep. II* and we are led to encounter the mystery of Christ's divinity in "transcendent outpouring of light".⁴⁷

Ps.-Dionysios' view of the univers as a structure essentially infused by the divine light reflects, also, a metaphysics of the light, whilst Jesus is the deifying light and hierarchies communicate light and love, and *"this light, which proceeds*

⁴³ See *Ep. V* and *DN VII.2* for the equation of the cloud of Sinai (γνόφος) with the "unapproachable light" (ἀπρόσιτον φῶς) in 1 Tm. 6:16. Cf., J.A. McGuckin, "Perceiving Light from Light in Light (Oration 31.3): The Trinitarian Theology of Gregory the Theologian" *GOTR* 39 (1994): 7-31.

⁴⁴ Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 58.

⁴⁵ Golitzin here is referring to the Dionisius' specific text of the *Ep. III*, 1069B (159:3-10): *"Suddenly" (ἐξαίφνης) means that which comes forth from the hitherto invisible and beyond hope into manifestation. And I think that here the Scripture [lit., 'theology'] is suggesting the philanthropy of Christ. The super-essential has proceeded out of its hiddenness to become manifest to us by becoming a human being. But He is also hidden, both after the manifestation and, to speak more divinely, even within it. For this is the hidden of Jesus, and neither by rational discourse nor by intuition can His mystery [μυστήριον] be brought forth, but instead, even when spoken it remains ineffable, and when conceived with the intellect, unknowable [ἄγνωστον]"*.

⁴⁶ Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 58.

⁴⁷ Plotinus, too, uses "sudden" (*Enneads* V.3.17 and VI.7.36) to point out the vision of the One in light. See, A. Golitzin, "'Suddenly', Christ: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites," in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Shepherd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 8-37; and István Perczel, "The Christology of Pseudo-Dionysius: The Fourth Letter in its Direct and Indirect Translation," *Le Muséon* 117/3-4 (2004): 409-446.

from and returns to its source, the Father, is none other than Jesus".⁴⁸ Jesus appears to Paul as a blinding light from heaven, "his pseudonymous identity" in Acts 9, 3 and 22, 6: "suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) a light from heaven flashed about [Paul]".⁴⁹ We enter into God through God, Christ and the Church as His body is the place of the encounter with God. Thus, "entering into" the divine presence (γένομαι, *Ep. X*) represents, according to Golitzin, a "key theophany".⁵⁰ But Christ himself is the deifying gift (θεοποιῶν δῶρον, *Ep. III*). He gives his actions (ἐνέργειαι) or powers (δυνάμεις), but not his essence (οὐσία). This is the distinction between God *in se* and *ad extra*.

A theophany of light attached to the word "sudden" intends to signify the presence of Christ, as the sudden flash of the "unapproachable light" within together with his visitation within the temple of body of the ascet. St Ephrem links the "sudden" to Christ, to light. It is Christ Who is the "star of light Who shone forth suddenly" in the Incarnation.⁵¹ Also, in *Life of Anthony* the "father of monks" says that "suddenly" the roof of the tomb where he is staying opens up and a ray or beam of light descends to surround him. The light carries the presence of Christ, who expels the demons and fills the power of this light the weakened body of the ascetic.⁵² Christ is the "Splendor" (φέγγος) of the Father and the visible appearance of the unseen Father.⁵³

b) *Shekinah* and the round mandorla

The mandorla could be mistaken with the cloud as the glory of God. But, the cloud enters the narrative after the change itself, as a separate element. The voice of the Father reveals His filial relationship with Christ, expression of "the hypostatical definition rather than unity of essence".⁵⁴ Godhead is revealed in the glory of the Christ. Origen and Anastasios the Sinaite say that Moses and Elijah

⁴⁸ Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, 94. Dionysian Christology can be read as a response to Paul's rhetorical question from 2 Cor 6:14: "What fellowship is there between light and darkness?" (Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, 97).

⁴⁹ Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity*, 95-96. Several passages from Paul's letters support Dionysius' understanding of Jesus as light: 2 Cor 4:6 ("For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"); Eph 5:8 ("For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light"); Col 1:12 ("the Father . . . has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light").

⁵⁰ Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 42.

⁵¹ Ephrem Syrus, *De natura*, 6.7, *CSCO* 186, 52; ET: K. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 112, apud Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 47.

⁵² *Vita Antonii* 10; PG XXVI, 860A.

⁵³ Juan Ochagavia, SJ, *Visibile Patris Filius. A Study of Irenaeus's Teaching on Revelation and Tradition* (Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1964), 43-81.

⁵⁴ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 98.

were also transfigured in glory. The spatial rather than the luminous nature of mandorla is more appropriate for a narrative reading, which describes "*the manifestation of the glory of God, a glimpse of the Trinity, as opposed to the continous splendor of Christ*".⁵⁵

According to the Gospel narratives as well as several Fathers, the luminous cloud enveloped not only the prophets but also the apostles. This suggests that the round mandorla does not signify the luminous cloud; rather, it is a symbolic rendering of the glory of God as a tabernacle/*shekinah*. The Unprepared one who could not endure the divine light, remained outside the tabernacle of God. They are granted the vision by the divine grace only. The round mandorla appeared for the first time in the Rabbula Gospels Transfiguration in the sixth century and was found quite commonly in Transfiguration depictions until the eleventh century, to portay the glory of God. The round mandorla is an expression of the place where God is, and it corresponds very closely to the concept of *shekinah*.

The word *shekinah*, says Andreopoulos, expressed "*a physical manifestation of God within history, a revelation and a dwelling and a sanctification of a place*".⁵⁶ *Shekinah* corresponded to the "tabernacle of God" in the physical world and was connected with the messianic enthronement.

c) *Yeqara* and the oval mandorla with rays

The oval mandorla corresponds with the luminous characteristics of the *kabod* (glory). "*Drawn around the body of Christ in a way that represents a luminance and not a space, it is consistent with the understanding of kabod as yeqara and also with the Johannine and patristic identification of Christ as light or, specifically to the Transfiguration, as the glory of the Father*".⁵⁷ The oval mandorla that envelops the transfigured Sinaitic image of Christ – the prototype for the oval mandorla type in general – consists of three concentric oval layers, increasingly dark they approach the center. The metaphorical darkness or blindness is caused by excessive luminosity. The excessive radiance reflects the patristic strand of the theology of darkness (Philo, Gregory of Nyssa, pseudo-Dionysios). More importantly, in relation to the oval mandorla, all who expounded the theology of light in terms of the ascent of Moses ended this ascent in divine darkness. "*The Sinai Mandorla, different from the circular luminous mandorla more frequently used until the eleventh century, expresses the culmination of the ascetic ascent in the most mystical*

⁵⁵ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 96.

⁵⁶ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 88.

⁵⁷ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 90.

representation of the time – the depiction of the excessive divine light as the darkness of the incognoscibility of God, even in his revelation".⁵⁸

The layered oval mandorla with rays, which could not be confused with the luminous cloud, was a more appropriate symbol to express the mystical "non-narrative" light of Christ. The second constituent meaning of the glory of God, *yeqara*, which Hans Urs von Balthasar reads as an expression of the sensory experience of light is "*the resplendent glory which reveals and hides God at the same time, similar to the spiritual brightness*".⁵⁹ It is appropriate only to the person to whom the glory belongs and cannot be extended to cover beholders, because it does not constitute a holy space with the characteristics of a tabernacle, as was the case with *shekinah*. In conclusion, highlights Andreopoulos, in contrast to later depiction of the Transfiguration, the Sinai mosaic shows the apostle very close to Christ and the prophets, something that suggests *theosis is possible*.⁶⁰

6. Hypostatic *Enargeia* and the Theophanic Icon. Theophany becomes ontophany and anthropophany - divinization of beings is an act of ontological revelation

Exploring the ontological and aesthetic implications of Orthodox ascetic and mystical theology, Cornelia A. Tsakiridou argues that the ancient Greek concept of *enargeia* the best conveys the expression of *theophany* and *theosis* in art.⁶¹ Here grace is not used metaphorically. It exists as an aesthetic reality.

She gives an example based on the famous icon of the Sinai Pantocrator: "*Enargeia is hypostatic. We see a face in its act of existing*".⁶² *Enargic* icons present their subjects not as a collage of signifiers but as beings realizing in their acts of existence the qualities that constitute their distinctive natures. *Enargeia*, thus, according to Tsakiridou, resonates with the Christian conception of the human person: "It is not, in other words, what Marion calls an 'idol' or 'the phenomenality of the saturated phenomenon' behind and through which operates an abstract visibility, a Platonic universal of the image that haunts the intellect... It is not a façade behind which, as in a *prosopeion* or mask, we may posit *in absentia*... *Enargeia* is that movement in the work of art that constitutes its object as a living being, existing in, through and toward its own nature, presenting its face *de*

⁵⁸ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 91.

⁵⁹ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 88.

⁶⁰ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 138.

⁶¹ Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity. Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

⁶² Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 55.

profundis, from a depth which it possesses and which it offers *for free* to the viewer. *Enlargeia* transforms the image from a flat semblance of world to an aesthetic being in its own right, a *zoon aesthetikon*. It is therefore the fulfillment of art's being, its ontological fruition".⁶³

Enlargeia describes an act of hypostatic expression that originates inside the art object. In asceticism and theophany human beings enter and taste the life of perfection. "*Theophany becomes ontophany, the epiphany and restoration of being*", because "*the divinization of beings is an act of ontological revelation. Theological and aesthetic realities become indistinguishable. But this is not aestheticism or religious spectacle. It is, rather, an ontophany*".⁶⁴

The icon is alive and brings theophany and holiness to the senses. This relationship between theophany and art demonstrates that "the *visio dei* in Orthodoxy is a discernible empirical reality" and the divine light inhabits beings. So, says Tsakiridou, "Theophany is ontophany and anthropophany".⁶⁵

Theophany sends naturally to the issue of the doctrine of the Divine Energies. St Gregory Palamas answered his critics by arguing for the hypostatic character of the divine vision and the deification of the body. God is a reality, a living actuality (as *energeia*). The divine light is his presence. Palamas insists on the immanence of the divine vision, the radiance of "an invisible (*aphanous*) glory". To see it, is to see God's active presence in the world. He is the Taboric light; and Theophany is the appearance or revelation of God in the world. Palamas borrows the Areopagite notion of "spiritual sensation (*pneumatiken aisthesin*)" that is, sensation infused by the Holy Spirit. He describes it in terms of "participation (*methexis*)", "reception (*lepsis*)" and "divinization (*ektheosis*)".⁶⁶ "Methexis" is dynamic. "Ektheosis" implies divinization from within, "*which is the splendor (apagausma) of deified flesh*" (Tr. II.iii.18).⁶⁷ Therefore, according to Tsakiridou, "the most tangible instance of theophany is in the saint",⁶⁸ because the "deified (*theourgesan*)" bodies of the saints can be seen with "bodily eyes (*somatikois ophthalmois*)" transformed (*metharmosamenon*) and filled with a "radiant light (*lamprotetos*)" (cf., Tr. II.iii.9, 20). This ontophany represent the "aesthetic face of being".⁶⁹ That's why St. John Climacus says that "he is a hesychast who strives to

⁶³ Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 56.

⁶⁴ Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 152, 246.

⁶⁵ Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 252.

⁶⁶ Tr. I.iii.18, 21; cf. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 255.

⁶⁷ Tr. I.iii.28: "that light is not sensible (*aistheton*), even though the Apostles were deemed worthy to see it with their very own eyes, but through another, not sensible (*aesthetike*) power".

⁶⁸ Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 256.

⁶⁹ Victor Bychkov, *The Aesthetic Face of Being: Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*, trans. by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993).

confine the incorporeal in the corporeal (*asomaton en somati*) a true paradox (*to paradoxon*).⁷⁰

In conclusion, says Tsakiridou, “what happens to light and beings in theophany recalls the movement that gives us *enargeia*. In *enargeia* an interior (internalized) motion is present in the image that accounts for its vividness. All instances of *enargeia* are epiphanic but not all are theophanic”.⁷¹ For her this means that an image can enter the realm of theophany aesthetically without the need of representation or symbolism by simply being itself.⁷² The painting itself participates in theophany, a reality that is both tangible and visibly transcendent.

7. Icons and the Theology of Light

Hesychasm is a monastic tradition of contemplative prayer that began roughly in the early fifth century on Mount Sinai. Hesychastic contemplation was sometimes accompanied by visions of the divine light. This connected it naturally with the tradition of the theology of light from the writings of the Fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius of Pontus, Ps-Makarios, Diadochos of Photiki, Mark the Ascetic, Isaac the Syrian, John of the Ladder, Maximos the Confessor and Gregory the Sinaite.⁷³ The light is the main conceptual and theological focus of all the themes synthesis: Transfiguration as a theophany and as a revelation of the inner life of God, this visual manifestation of the two nature of Christ, the usual patristic view that the body of Christ was glorified by the glory of his divinity. The icon of the Transfiguration was the best possible iconographic portrayal of the two natures of Christ.

The juxtaposition Palamites – iconoclasts, allow Gregoras to transpose the whole 9th c. ideological situation (as he understood it) into the 14th c. and make it seem up-to-date and actual. “*If Hesychasm in Gregoras’ interpretation was no more than a renovated iconoclasm in combination with other heresies of old times, if Palamas was a heretic par excellence (new Arius, Eunomius, and Eusebius), Gregoras himself would naturally become a new confessor Theodoros Graptos, and Ioannes Kantakouzenos – a new impious tyrant Theophilos. It seems*

⁷⁰ PG 88:1097B, cf. Tr. I.ii.6. See, John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008), 53-61. And his book about the *John Climacus: From the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2004), 101-130.

⁷¹ Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 258.

⁷² Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 263.

⁷³ John Anthony McGuckin, *Standing in God’s Holy Fire: The Byzantine Tradition* (Mayknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 109-130.

highly probable that Gregoras did have this picture in mind".⁷⁴ Nikephoros' testimonies were employed by both parties to prove that their opponents were guilty of iconoclasm. Gregoras became the first to lay an accusation of iconoclasm (iconoclastic theology of the Tabor light). Philotheos Kokkinos after having quoted Gregoras, while citing Nikephoros begins refutation in the 11th *Oration against Nikephoros Gregoras*, where he even confessed that the teaching of Gregoras and Akindynos matches in many ways that of Arians and iconoclasts (Ioannes Italos was guilty of iconoclasm). Lukhovitskij conclusion is that the accusation of iconoclasm originated within the anti-Palamite circles and at least on the first stages of the controversy it were anti-Palamites who attacked and Palamites who were forced to defend. V. Lourié expressed an opposite view: anti-Palamites were hostile to sacred images since their teaching inevitably deprived God's energies of the ability to be actually present in the icon, thus, Palamites actually revealed their enemies' hidden iconoclasm.⁷⁵ Therefore, "*As soon as the partisans of icon veneration (Ioannes Damaskenos, Nikephoros of Constantinople, Theodoros Stoudites etc.) and their spiritual heirs (Photios of Constantinople) established an inextricable theological link between iconoclasm and earlier Christological heresies, a charge of iconoclasm became equal to an accusation of all these previous blasphemies taken together (Arianism, Nestorianism, Docetism, etc.)*".⁷⁶ Barlaam became the first to recognize the fundamental distinction between the Augustinian theology of the divine essence and the hesychasts' theology of the uncreated light. The light beheld by the hesychasts is identified by Palamas *with the light that shone around Christ at the Transfiguration. It is not a created symbol, but the "garment of their deification" and a foretaste of the light that will eternally illuminate the blessed (Triads i.3.5, 26)*.⁷⁷ As shown by David Bradshaw, it is in searching for a term suitable for referring both to the light of the Transfiguration and to the "things around God" that Palamas introduces the concept of *energeia*. "*Palamas thus draws together under the single concept*

⁷⁴ Lev Lukhovitskij, "Historical Memory of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the 14th c.: the Case of Nikephoros Gregoras and Philotheos Kokkinos," in *Aesthetics and Theurgy in Byzantium*, ed. Sergei Mariev and Wiebke-Marie Stock (Boston/Berlin, Göttingen: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2013), 205-230, here 224. This clearly stated typological principle allows Gregoras to use antiarian, antieunomian and antiiconoclastic sources to refute what he calls "Palamite heresy". For the obsession with the 9th c. during the Hesychast controversy on the iconographic level, see D. Kotoula, "The British Museum Triumph of Orthodoxy Icon," in *Byzantine Orthodoxies*, ed. A. Louth and A. Casiday (Aldershot: Ashgate/Valorum, 2006), 121-130.

⁷⁵ Lukhovitskij, "Historical Memory of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the 14th c.", 216.

⁷⁶ Lukhovitskij, "Historical Memory of Byzantine Iconoclasm in the 14th c.", 205.

⁷⁷ The light is in fact the eternal and uncreated glory of God: "*God, while remaining entirely in Himself, dwells entirely in us by His superessential power, and communicates to us not His nature but His proper glory and splendour*" (Tr. i.3.23).

of energeia a number of themes that previously had existed more or less in isolation: the uncreated light, the 'things around God', the Cappadocian teaching on the divine names, and the Pauline and Cappadocian understanding of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit".⁷⁸ Through the energies of God, we know the beauty and splendour of God. Anita Strezova says that Palamas instigated a 'new Christocentric humanism' founded on the hesychast concepts of theosis, synergia and theologia. "*This approach to the issue of experience of God implied the basic anthropological presupposition that man was capable of transcending his own nature, as well as the main theological principle that God – even when he communicates himself – remains transcendent*".⁷⁹ In terms of symbolism, important novelties were the introduction of complex mandorla, the appearance of eight rays of light, the appearance of the *ΩΝ* ('I am who I am') monogram on the halo of Christ, and the introduction of three-dimensional rainbows.⁸⁰

The icon of the Transfiguration was the best way to translate into imagery the hesychastic views on the uncreated light. The apostles are more than mere witnesses to the event, they dynamically perceive the glory of Christ. Moreover, the representation of the mountain is almost personalized and it has to do with the significance of the ascetic ascent. The "hesychastic" mandorla appears in the fourteenth-century churches of Mistra in an illumination from the manuscript of the emperor-monk John (Ioasaph) VI Kantakouzenos. This magnificent mandorla, with or without rays consists of two superimposed concave squares actually a square and a rhombus – inside a circle. Andreas Andreopoulos identified the Transfiguration as a revelation of the Trinity: "*It is possible, though, that Orthodox iconography wanted to represent the Father alone as the circle that has no beginning or end, and the two others hypostases as rectangles, in order to express the Eastern reaction to the Western addition of the filioque to the Nicene Creed*".⁸¹ Moreover, the precise positioning of Christ in the circle reminds us of Christ's

⁷⁸ David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 237-238.

⁷⁹ Anita Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art: The Appearance of New Iconographic Trends in Byzantine and Slavic Lands in the 14th and 15th Centuries* (Canberra, Australia: The Australian National University Press, 2014), 51, 62.

⁸⁰ Strezova, *Hesychasm and Art*, 73-75. The painted surfaces were illuminated with white strokes (on the face, neck and hands) representing the rays of the divine light. Also, the image of Theotokos (the Mother of God) the Life-Giving Spring appeared in the 14th century. Thus, the *Akathist Hymn* at the Trinity Church, Cosia, symbolises Palamas's concepts regarding the role of the Virgin in the history of salvation. She is endorsed with a complex mandorla that is commonly reserved for Christ (this also testifies the role of Theotokos in salvation, a representative of those who acquired true vision of light). According to the teaching of St Gregory Palamas, she has, in fact, brought the light into the world.

⁸¹ Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, p. 231.

words "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me" (Jn. 14, 10). Theophanes the Greek follows and completes the Byzantine hesychastic type by some details that refer to hesychastic theology directly, such as the rays of light and the unusual illumination of Moses, Elijah and the three apostles. The two interpenetrating triangles expresses the downward movement of the Incarnation and revelation of the divinity of Christ to humanity, combined with the upward movement of the ascetic ascent, the doctrine of the divine and human synergy. This unique mandorla gives a sense of spiritual escalation through light to Christ, who is the source of light. Theophanes did something revolutionary to indicate Christ as the source of light, *"The body of Elijeh, Moses, and the three apostles are illuminated not only from the inside, as in customary in Byzantine iconography, but also from the outside in a way that indicates Christ as the sources of the physical light. This is highly unusual. Byzantine iconography never indicates any sources of the external light"*.⁸² The rays emitting from Christ and reaching the apostles are intentionally asymmetrical and they end at the faces of Peter, John and James. Theophanes here indicates that the rays symbolize: 1. the uncreated energies of God, 2. the grace that was given to the three apostles from Christ, 3. The operation of the Holy Spirit that allowed them to see Christ in his divinity. The rays end not merely on the faces, but specifically on the eyes of the apostle. Thus, covered with the beauty of ineffable glory of the Spirit, apostles *"becomes all light, all face, all eye"*⁸³ (Hom 1, 2), because there is no part of the soul that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light.

Then the theological justification of the correct approach to the veneration of icons is found ultimately in the teaching of the Eastern Fathers on deification.⁸⁴ This "perception" of the participation of the icons in the uncreated, purifying and sanctifying energy of God is so intense that the only way out is through worship, that is, through actually turning toward God.⁸⁵

⁸² Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, p. 247.

⁸³ Pseudo-Macarius, *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, Translated, Edited and with an Introduction By George A. Maloney, S.J., Preface By Kallistos Ware (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), 31.

⁸⁴ Leonidas Contos, *The Concept of Theosis in Gregory Palamas, with a critical text of the 'Contra Akindynum'*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles, 1963). See, also: Alexis Torrance, "Precedents for Palamas' Essence-Energies Theology in the Cappadocian Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): 47-70 and A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸⁵ Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon: a Theology of Beauty* (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood, Publications, 1972). Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978). Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991).

8. Conclusion

The iconophile veneration of icons may be summarised as follows: The uncreated God imparts himself to his creatures in his uncreated glory or energies. Only the saints and the angels participate in the deifying energies of God. The illuminating energies are also participated in through the icon by virtue of the icon's hypostatic identity with its prototype. Contact/veneration with the icon/vehicle of these divine energies communicates the latter to the venerator himself in proportion to his spiritual state. Denial of the possibility of participation in divine energies by means of the veneration of the icons means the rejection of the Church's doctrine on the deification of human nature. Beholding the human face of Jesus Christ, whose "eyes are like a flame of fire" (Rev. 2, 18), the viewer sees the image of God reflected in God's Eternal Image. Studying the significance of icons is the best way for us to understand the theology of experience. The icon emits iconographic light from inside. The bodies of the saints seem to be lit from inside. Very often this light makes the faces and the bodies of the saints seem bright, almost transparent. Light gives substance (*hypostasis*) to the icons. This is no ordinary light, is the Uncreated light of the Second Jerusalem. Therefore, says Andreopoulos "*the icon certainly belongs to the East*".⁸⁶ There are many questions that could help us to approach the divine revelation: *what* was revealed, *who* was revealed, *who* received who participated in the revelation, and *how* did this revelation take place. The Transfiguration describes directly the revelation of the kingdom. But there is a key to understand the whole event through this icon: the body of Christ *is* light. Christ extends his light beyond the physical boundaries of his human body and by this sending of the light of the Father to the viewer, "*Christ's outpouring of his divinity as portrayed in the icon of the Transfiguration, he Christ-ifies those who step into his light and becomes part of his extended body*".⁸⁷ The transition from the narrative to the hesychast type is a shift of the focus of the icon to the experience of the divine light. There is a directional flow from the apostles toward Christ as they are invited to behold and participate in his glory. The first who connect the Transfiguration specifically with theosis is St Andrew of Crete. For him the Transfiguration is the revelation of the deified humanity of Christ.

During the hesychast controversy, St Gregory Palamas defended the reality of seeing a vision of light at the culmination of intense period of prayer. The light is nothing less than the uncreated radiance of God accessible to the

⁸⁶ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Gazing on God. Trinity, Church and salvation in Orthodox Thought and Iconography* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2013), 59.

⁸⁷ Andreas Andreopoulos, *This is My Beloved Son. The Transfiguration of Christ* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2012), 83-93.

senses. This manifestation of Christ is not something external to ourselves, but *it is possible only by having Christ radiant within us*. Abba Pambo, Sisoës, Silvanus, St Seraphim of Sarov, were men whose radiance was the product of inward openness. For them the Transfiguration becomes an interior experience. In the fourteenth century, the distinction that Gregory Palamas draws between the divine essence and actions, *energeiai*, is offered in order to allow for the possibility of the vision of uncreated light without at the same time compromising the divine transcendence. This light of Christ is coming from within the ascetic as the radiance of God himself (but also shedding outside the body and concentrated on the shining face of the saint).

The "*aesthetics of apophaticism*" is an icon of *the invisible beauty* as light in the "shining face" of the ascet. Therefore, this "Shining Face" Christology⁸⁸ is developed in the theology of the icon.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Bogdan G. Bucur notes that "face" Christology, one of the early building blocks for emerging Christian doctrine, never became a major player, but was replaced by more precise vocabulary shaped by the Christological controversies of the third and fourth centuries. See, on this subject: Bogdan G. Bucur, "The Divine Face and the Angels of the face: Jewish Apocalyptic Themes in Early Christology and Pneumatology," in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Baker Academic: Grand Rapids 2009), 143-153. Bucur outlined the occurrence of "face" Christology in Clement of Alexandria, Aphrahat the Persian sage, and in the seven spirits of the book of revelation.

⁸⁹ A direct experience of God's presence, identified as "uncreated light" is found in the theophanic experiences. In this "mystical realism" of the divine-human communion, God is manifesting Himself as absolutely transcendent and immanent at the same time. This theological description of the light of Christ's Face, consisting in different views of God, is a *theology of facts*. Such an "aesthetics of apophaticism" (the beauty of the body, participating in the light of grace) "visible" in the bodies of ascetics, a theology of "brightness", may explain, also, the spirituality of light founded in the contemporary monastic theology (Seraphim of Sarov, Siluan the Athonite, Sophrony Sakharov or Paisios the Athonite). Anthro-po-*phanie* as "aesthetics of apophaticism", i.e. theophanic experience of the past and present "Holy Fathers", is also reflected in mystical theology of Father Stăniloae by: 1) "intermediary apophaticism" 2) "transfiguration" of the heart 3) "shining face" of man 4) "Face of Christ" (divine energies, irradiated in His human face). For this, see my recent studies: "Orthodox Spirituality as 'Aesthetics of Apophaticism' – an open dialogue between contemporary monastic experience and spiritual theology of Father Dumitru Stăniloae", in *Monahismul creștin și lumea post-modernă*, ed. Alexandru Ionitță & Éliane Poirot OCD, Studia Oecumenica 11 (Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2016); "The Aesthetics of Asceticism. 'The feeling' (*aisthesis*) of the Apophatic as Irradiance of the Inner Presence of Christ (Prolegomena for a Dialogue between Ascetic and Phenomenology)," *Mitropolia Olteniei* 5-8 (2016): 149-163; "Aesthetics Of Apophaticism. The Christophany as the enipostatic Light of Godhead shining of the face of the ascetic," *Studii teologice* 2 (2015); "'The Shining Face' and the revealing Paradox - Man is theophatic. The light of the Face of Christ, despite its uncreated and incomprehensible nature, is perceptible by human senses (purity-illumination-vision or κάθαρσις-φωτισμός-θέωσις)," *Studii Teologia* 3 (2015); "Body (*epsoma*) and Glory / Light (*peooy*). Apa Aphou and the Hesychastic-Eucharistic turn of the Anthropomorphic controversy," in *Dumnezeu - izvorul înțelepciunii : teologie și educație ascetică la Sfinții Părinți*, ed. Daniel Lemeni (Astra Museum, Sibiu: 2016); "The Splendour of the Deified Flesh. Glorification

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